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Dorothy West: The Living Is Easy

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The Literary Encyclopedia

The Living is Easy

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West, Dorothy
(1948)

[A Yemisi Jimoh \(University of Massachusetts Amherst\)](#)

Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

When Dorothy West's first novel, *The Living Is Easy*, was published in 1948, the United States was emerging from the war years and was still haunted by the collapse of its economy in the 1930s. During these decades, black writers were encouraged by publishers to move away from questions of social justice, even though the period saw persistent racialized social unrest. Prevailing social policies in the United States and its publishing industry during the 1940s emphasized an ideology which Philip Butcher, in a 1948 review of West's novel in *Opportunity* magazine, referred to as “raceless writers”. Dorothy West's title for her novel, *The Living Is Easy*, suggests that she

was aware of this optimistic mood, even as in her novel she ironically undercuts such winsomeness. The race and perhaps gender politics in publishing – issues that West's title masks – in fact, precluded serialization of *The Living Is Easy* in *Ladies' Home Journal*, as that magazine's publishers feared they would lose readers if they followed through on plans to publish West's novel in installments.

Dorothy West's novel *The Living Is Easy* is set in Boston, July 1914 through April 1919 – years that span the war-time conflict in Europe – with the United States entering in 1917 – and the post-war conflict generally referred to as the red (bloody) summer of 1919 in the United States. Cleo Judson, West's main character in this novel, is southern and beautiful. As a teenager she moves to Massachusetts and works in the homes of her white, female benefactors. At nineteen Cleo marries Bart Judson, who also is from the South. Bart is a hardworking businessman and is significantly older than his manipulative wife Cleo. Through flashbacks to Cleo's southern childhood, West prepares readers for this character's shrewd maneuvers of her husband and sisters, as well as for her resistance to limiting gender roles. In one passage, Dorothy West depicts Cleo as a

strong-willed and independent-minded child who fights and beats a little boy after he taunts her. West's Cleo then wonders, "What was there to being a boy? What was there to being a man? Men just worked. That was easier than what women did."

As a married woman, West's Cleo – in what one might see as a characteristically African American expression of cultural syncretism – combines aspects from the nineteenth century concept of the True Woman (though Cleo is no angel-in-the-house) with aspects of the emergent New Woman of the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century. Cleo wants to create her own domain over which she can rule within the domestic sphere. The males in this household are marginal or are tools which Cleo uses to enact her plans. Cleo's one male nephew is a benign presence, and Bart, Cleo's husband, is the means through which she reproduces herself and is her source of financial support. In fact, "It had never occurred to her [Cleo] in the ten years of her marriage that she might be his [Bart's] helpmate. She thought that was the same thing as being a man's slave."

In the summer of 1914, Cleo brings her sisters

and their children to her home in Boston for a visit, and she effectively manipulates and deceives them until they are living with her and are estranged from their husbands. Cleo's sisters illustrate the limitations that women encountered under the prevailing gender narratives. Lily accepts dependence; she wants to “please” Bart; she will stay quiet in order to keep his protection. Charity feels empty without her husband and turns to food as a substitute. Serena wants her own independence – even from her sister Cleo – as well as love. Serena encounters the social barriers of race and gender, yet she persists in shaping her own life-narrative. Judy, Cleo's only child, observes her mother and resists her control by aligning herself with her male cousin Tim. Judy realizes that Cleo “was the boss of nothing but the young, the weak, the frightened. She ruled a pygmy kingdom.” Cleo's designs for a female domain are ultimately frustrated.

Through Cleo, Dorothy West complicates the image of the enduring, loving, black matriarch, and she abandons the stock response of tragic sympathy for a near-white middle-class, female character. Both of these motifs one may easily find in fiction from the early decades of the

twentieth century. Cleo Jericho Judson's actions are misguided, but her motive is to situate her vision of the lifestyle and cultural base of the African American south within the economic base of middle-class Boston, and to define within this a space for female power. Cleo, ultimately, gets everything she wants but is defeated by the broader economic problems of her time as well as by her own over-reaching. West illustrates in *The Living Is Easy* the small space that black, middle-class women occupy in her novel, and she delineates the weakly derivative and obsessively color-conscious base on which her black middle-class characters – male and female – rest. This small, exclusive group consists in the struggling descendants of tailors and stable owners who prefer light skin color and avoid acknowledging anything as ugly as lynching. Cleo's world disintegrates after Bart's business fails. Thus, Cleo's dream of a female utopia has become strangely dystopic without Bart's support, thereby demonstrating the power of the dominant structures of race and gender.

Work Cited

Butcher, Philip. "Our Raceless Writers." *Opportunity* 26 (1948): 113-115.

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